ORAL STATEMENT OF

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U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

BEFORE THE
SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE YEAR 2000 TECHNOLOGY PROBLEM
UNITED STATES SENATE

FIELD HEARING
ANAHEIM, CALIFORNIA
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Mr. Chairman:

I am Dana D. Minerva, Deputy Assistant Administrator for Water of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and I am pleased to be here today. I am accompanied by Steve Clark, Technical Advisor to the Director, Office of Groundwater and Drinking Water in our Office of Water, and also by two individuals from our Office of Administration and Resources Management: Orlando Plater, Y2K Project Manager; and Don Flattery, Sector Outreach Coordinator for EPA's Y2K Project Team. With the Chairman's permission, I would like to submit my written statement for the record and to briefly summarize that statement for you this morning.

Overview of Drinking Water and Wastewater Service Providers

It is important for the Committee to have a picture of the "community" that treats and safeguards our nation's water to better understand the potential impacts of the Year 2000 technology problem. Drinking water and wastewater utilities are a diverse collection of providers, serving a wide spectrum of communities--from trailer parks to large cities.

Approximately 55,000 community water systems in the United States provide drinking water to 92% of the population. The remaining 8% of the population gets its drinking water from wells. It is worth noting that 15% of these water systems serve 75% of the population. In addition, approximately 116,000 water supplies serve populations such as schools, hospitals, factories, small businesses, roadside rest stops, and campgrounds.

With respect to wastewater treatment systems, there are approximately 20,000 facilities in the United States. Of these, about 16,000 treatment systems or 80% serve approximately 190 million people. Approximately 15% of these facilities serve 60% of the population, providing treatment to communities of over 10,000 people.

In brief, the majority of the nation's population is served by a relatively small number of large drinking water and municipal wastewater treatment systems.

Characterization of the Problem

Treatment systems vary greatly in their degree of automation and sophistication, with the larger plants being heavily automated while some of the smaller plants have little, if any, computerized equipment. However, many plants, both large and small, have individual pieces of equipment that have embedded computer chips. All automated aspects of the treatment process must be assessed to determine susceptibility to the Y2K problem.

Fact Finding and Outreach Efforts

Our challenge is to identify the best ways to reach drinking water and wastewater treatment systems with helpful information about this problem. Our effort in this area is being done in conjunction with the President's Council on Year 2000 Conversion.

EPA has had numerous contacts and stakeholder meetings with trade and professional associations and utilities, and has visited several treatment facilities to gain a better understanding

of the problems utilities must solve and their Year 2000 readiness. Based on these discussions and site visits, we believe that most of the large drinking water and wastewater plants are actively taking steps toward making necessary corrections.

Several of these associations surveyed their members, and I understand they shared the results with you, indicating that a majority of the larger plants are dealing with the problem. We are very appreciative of their efforts.

We have less information, however, about the readiness and the level of awareness of the small and medium plants. Although they are generally less automated than the larger plants, without examination and assessment it is hard to predict whether these plants are prepared.

EPA speakers have discussed Y2K issues in numerous fora. We have distributed our fact sheet, as well as EPA's informational articles. We have established an EPA Water Sector Y2K web page with linkages to related sites. We are planning additional stakeholders meetings and are sending letters to over 560 Federally recognized tribes. We are coordinating outreach activities with our Regional Offices and are working with the other Federal agencies to assure coverage of Federally-operated treatment systems.

External Factors

Some external factors beyond the control of drinking water and wastewater utilities include: the electric and telecommunications utilities, our transportation system, and suppliers to

the treatment systems, such as chemical companies supplying chlorine and fluoride. Also, if pretreatment providers experience Y2K-caused problems, downstream wastewater treatment facilities could experience difficulties causing public health and environmental quality problems. We are encouraging drinking water and wastewater utilities to meet with external service and chemical suppliers and pretreatment providers to ensure that their contingency plans address the potential inability of these entities to deliver needed materials and services.

Permit Violations

Regarding the enforcement aspects of this problem, EPA expects all water and wastewater facilities to comply with environmental regulations before, during, and after the Year 2000. However, recognizing that treatment plants should be encouraged to test their Y2K repairs, EPA has issued an enforcement policy that waives some enforcement action if Y2K-caused violations occur during Y2K testing, provided that specific conditions are met. Also, such testing will be taken into consideration if enforcement violations result from Y2K causes on January 1, 2000 or on other "problem" dates.

Recommendations

With respect to your call for recommendations, we offer the following suggestions. First, it would be helpful for you to encourage the power and telecommunications sectors to continue to move swiftly toward Y2K compliance and to include wastewater systems and drinking water systems as a high priority in their service restoration plans.

Second, it may be advisable to explore the ability and resources of small communities and tribes to deal with this issue.

Summary

In closing, I would like to say that drinking water and wastewater utilities are making good progress in their efforts to identify and fix potential Y2K problems. We continue to reach out to these utilities to ensure that large and small facilities have identified these problems and have access to important information. I also commend the trade and professional associations for their efforts.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this important issue today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.